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Conservatism and Communitarianism: Two or One?

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Abstract: I argue that conservatism and communitarianism are not two distinct positions, but instead two names for the same approach to social and political arrangements and issues. Three reasons are offered for this claim: first, both conservatism and communitarianism can be understood as reactions to liberalism; second, both rely on communal traditions, rather than reason, to justify social and political prescriptions; and, finally, both are flexible in regard to their social and political prescriptions. Some practical applications of my thesis include a better understanding of how Donald Trump is the new face of conservatism in America and how a communitarian approach to political life could be divisive.

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Typically conservatism and communitarianism are interpreted as two distinct political theories. I argue that we have three reasons to see them as the same. First, both conservatism and conservatism are similar reactions to liberalism. Second, both rely on communal traditions, rather than reason, to support social and political prescriptions. Finally, both are flexible in their specific prescriptions and for similar reasons. A good place to begin my argument, though, is with the claim that conservatism and communitarianism are not the same. My thesis is only novel if the two positions are taken to be distinct.

On the face of it, the two theories appear distinct as conservatism is considered a right-wing political theory and communitarianism a left-wing political theory.[1] There are various ways one can cut up the political spectrum. The metric I use for dividing it is a focus on the individual as opposed to the community as well as whether the government has a role in contributing to the wellbeing of citizens. In the Anglo-American tradition--e.g. U.K., Canada and the U.S.--conservatism is typically associated with a non-interventionist government that respects the liberty of individual citizens.[2] Conservatives want to lower taxes, endorse small government, and reject attempts at social engineering by the government. Hence, conservatives often reject, or want to

limit, the extent to which governments redistribute wealth through taxation to develop social programs and institutions such as public health-care and education. Instead, they want to rely on the choices of individuals and market mechanisms to shape society, not on the government providing a welfare, or perfectionist, state.[3] In contrast, communitarians favor the community and the common good, rather than individual liberty, and will therefore endorse interventions that serve the interests of the community. For example, Michael Sandel proposes that a communitarian approach to governing would be open to intervening in the market to regulate plant closures in order to protect communities from economic disruption. This activity would benefit the community by keeping people employed, and the knock-on effects that ensue, but would interfere with the interests of citizens who have invested their limited resources in a private company.[4]

This is a meager indication of the commitments of each theory, and we will soon look at each in more detail. What this meager indication tells us, though, is that the two theories appear to be in opposition. They represent the contraries of the individual versus the community and noninterventionist government versus interventionist government. My claim is that when we get more into the details of each position, and focus on the core claims of each, the *façade* of difference is removed.

Recall that my argument depends on three points of connection between conservatism and communitarianism. In regard to the first two--a reaction to liberalism and the reliance on communal traditions--I rely on Edmund Burke to convey the conservative position. Burke wrote his famous pamphlet *Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)* as a criticism, obviously, of the French Revolution, but it remains one of the most influential expressions of conservative thought. In the pamphlet, Burke's main goals are to criticize aspects of liberal thought and make the case for the value of community and tradition.

In regard to criticisms of liberal thought, Burke does not mention John Locke by name but it does appear to be his position that Burke opposes. Locke had developed two key claims that Burke rejects. The first is the foundational value of individual liberty. For Locke, all humans possess the natural rights of freedom, equality, and property and these rights are discoverable through rational reflection. Of these three, freedom and equality seem to be the most important and act as the foundational values for the whole of society and especially for the legitimacy of government. A government is legitimate to the extent that it respects and protects freedom and equality, and has achieved the consent of those who it governs. If a government is not consented to by the people freely then it is not legitimate. Freedom and equality therefore stand independent of society, have inherent value, and can then be used to determine the legitimacy of any form of political organization.[5]

Burke rejects this type of position offered by Locke in various ways, but he begins by rejecting the value ascribed to liberty. Burke proposes that he is a lover of liberty but it is not an unqualified love of liberty, since he holds that liberty is not something that can be praised in the abstract. Liberty is not valuable on its own in isolation from other things we value, he claims, but is, instead, only valuable within specific contexts which determines its value. If liberty were something we could praise in the abstract, or in isolation from other things, Burke continues, then we would have to congratulate the "madman" who has escaped the constraints imposed on him to protect society. Of course we would not value the liberty of a madman, or we could use the updated example of a serial killer, so liberty is something that only has value based on the context in which it is embedded. Liberty must be situated within a constellation of other values in order to have value itself. Some of the other values, and social practices, Burke identifies as having to be in place

in order for liberty to possess value include government, the discipline and obedience of armies, morality and religion, peace and order, and a well-distributed revenue.[6]

For Burke liberty therefore does not have the type of inherent value that Locke proposes it does. Liberty is not a foundational value which can legitimize government. Instead, liberty requires government as one node in a web of values in order to explain its own value. Consequently, not only does Burke reject liberty as a foundational value, but it is the 'why' of his rejection that is pertinent for my argument. Burke rejects liberalism because what is most important is the larger communal context. It is this larger communal context that determines the value of liberty,[7] as well as everything else.

That it is the social, or communal, context which determines value is also confirmed by Burke's rejection of Locke's idea that political authority originates with free individuals who then transfer this authority to the sovereign. Burke claims that such a position is simply a "gross error of fact," noting that "the king of Great Britain is [. . .] king by a fixed rule of succession according to the laws of his country."[8] What therefore determines political authority within the state is not a natural right discoverable via reason, as Locke suggests, but the rules established by a community over time; or a specific tradition that has been embedded in the law of the land.

The general strategy of Burke's response to liberalism, then, is emphasize the relevance of the communal context for determining everything's value. This is the second component of my argument. Specifically, both conservatism and communitarianism rely on the community itself, and its various traditions, to determine its system of values as opposed to a liberal approach which attempts to rationally construct this system. That Burke ascribed this role to the community is confirmed by the following remarks where he proposes that society

> …is to be looked on with other reverence, because it […] is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and the invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and moral natures, each in their appointed place. This law is not subject to the will of those who by an obligation above them, and infinitely superior, are bound to submit their will to that law.[9]

There is a lot in this extensive quote that displays the primary role Burke ascribes to society. Society is an eternal thing that continues through successive generations. Society, or the community, is therefore prior to the individual. It links successive generations –the dead, the living and the yet to be born – and determines the roles and values of the various components of society. Society binds all into a shared life that determines people's knowledge, their value, their art, and their role in society. It is society that determines for people what they know, what they will value and what will give their life meaning since it is society that holds all physical and moral natures in their specific place. Society, for example, determines the role of women, men, the aristocrat and the peasant, the teacher and the student and so on. Rather than society having to submit to the inherent value of the free individual, as prescribed by Locke and other liberals, it is the obligation of citizens to revere and submit to society. Individuals must submit because it is the "eternal society" that determines everything in a "fixed compact […] which holds all physical and moral natures, each in their appointed place."[10]

We will see very shortly that this role assigned to the community by Burke, a seminal figure for conservatism, appears identical to the role ascribed by communitarians. Before we consider the communitarian position, there is one more aspect of conservatism, central to my argument, that

needs to be considered. This is the claim that conservatism is flexible in terms of its social and political prescriptions. It is a key component of my argument, since what would appear to separate conservatism and communitarianism are their substantive doctrines. For example, as outlined already, the two seem distinct since conservatives focus on individual liberty and a noninterventionist government while communitarians focus on the common good and the ability to intervene in society in order to realize it. This difference, I believe, is superficial since conservatism is flexible in regard to its specific doctrines.

In order to make the case that conservatism possess such flexibility I consult a first-year political science textbook written by University of Calgary political scientists Mark O. Dickerson, Thomas Flanagan and Brenda O'Neill. First year textbooks are not good for nuanced theoretical distinctions, but they are good for presenting the generic, or uncontroversial, interpretation of relevant concepts and theories. By consulting this textbook, therefore, we can reasonably obtain the standard view on conservatism.

The standard view, as detailed by Dickerson *et al*., is that conservatives are sceptical of change and want to maintain the status quo. By "status quo" they do not mean how things are done right now within a particular community, for conservatives often believe that the community is moving in the wrong direction. They compare current society to an ideal past and how things have been done over time. What conservatives want to maintain, then, is a tradition.[11] This is reflected in Burke who writes deliberately about the value of the European chivalric code and the aristocratic class on which it was based.[12] The traditions that the conservative wants to maintain, though, can vary from one community to another. As Dickerson *et al*. relate, conservatism in the Anglo-American tradition is identified with freedom, preservation of private property, and the rule of law, while on the European continent, conservatism has been identified with an hereditary aristocracy

and a "monarchy unchecked by representative government."[13] So conservatism in the Anglo-American tradition looks different from conservatism in Europe, or Saudi Arabia or Japan and so on. Consequently, conservatism is not tied to any specific substantive doctrines but instead to a specific formal structure. This formal structure is the traditions of a community.[14]

These traditions are maintained because they are perceived as important to determining the life of a community and its members, as Burke argued. The specific traditions will matter to the members of those communities, but no specific traditions can be identified with conservatism itself. This is because the traditions to be maintained can vary from one community to another, but can also change within a particular community. That is, as explained by Dickerson *et al*., conservatives will accept change but it must be change that occurs slowly over time through the choices of individual members of the community. For example, when Burke wrote his pamphlet to espouse conservative ideas, he had in mind the traditional aristocratic ideas of feudal Europe. Over time, though, conservatism has become associated with the classical liberalism he first criticized.[15] So the traditions vary, or are flexible, and what remains for conservatism is embedding life in specific traditions instead of some rational reconstruction of society as occurs with Liberalism.[16]

Based on this description of conservatism it is reasonable to conclude that it is the same position as communitarianism. To establish this claim, the writings of Michael Sandel are consulted. The focus, again, will be on three distinguishing features of communitarianism: a rejection of liberalism; the reliance on community and, finally, flexibility in regard to social and political prescriptions.

Like Burke, Sandel is reacting to the liberal position. The authors he is often critical of include Immanuel Kant and John Rawls. The general criticism offered by Sandel focuses on how

liberals such as Kant and Rawls portray human agents.[17] For example, Sandel proposes that a significant problem with Rawls' position is that it relies on a concept of an "unencumbered self, [or] a self understood as prior to and independent of purposes and ends."[18] What Sandel is referring to is Rawls' use of the veil of ignorance to generate the basic principles of a just society. The veil of ignorance is a thought experiment in which individuals reason without knowing anything about their empirical selves, such as their gender, ethnicity, economic status, community and so on. Participants are only supposed to choose principles because they are rational, i.e., because the principles serve their own interests no matter where they end up in society once the veil has been lifted. Thus, the ideal situation for making decisions for the basic structure of society, according to Rawls, involves reasoning without any knowledge of the empirical facts that define us, and relying only on rational self-interest.[19]

Sandel is critical of this view of human agents presented by Rawls specifically because this self is not defined by any of the things that typically connect people in the empirical world. As Sandel explains, Rawls' position sees the self as somehow distinct from the various projects, desires, and relationships it may take up in the empirical world. Such a position is mistaken, according to Sandel, because it is our various projects, desires, and relationships that are "inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of that history, as citizens of this republic," and so on.[20] Whether we are Indigenous or European, man or woman, Canadian or American, urban or rural and so on plays an important role in determining our personal identify. Moreover, these aspects of our identify are given to us by the communities in which we find ourselves. For example, whether I am born into the Anglophone, Indigenous or Francophone communities in Canada will play an important role in determining my sense of self and what I value. If I am a

Francophone then language will fulfill a bigger role in determining my identify than if I am an Anglophone. If I am Indigenous, then colonization will fulfill a bigger role in my identity and my concept of justice than if I am an Anglophone Canadian.[21] Such examples can be easily multiplied and nuanced. Sandel's point, then, is that individual persons are better understood as participants in a common life, for it is the community that determines who we are and what we value. Our self is shaped by our goals, attachments, and desires and these are determined by our communities. Since our sense of self is determined by our community, the attempt to remove the role of community in decision making, as advocated by Rawls, is problematic.[22]

This position offered by Sandel is similar to the one offered by Burke in two important respects. First, both criticize the liberal position for removing the background context which is so important for understanding something; whether it is understanding the value of liberty or understanding persons and how they reason. Second, and more importantly, the valuable context that is removed is the same for both Burke and Sandel. It is the community, and its various traditions,[23] which are deemed indispensable for determining how people see themselves and the world. As expressed by Sandel,

> The story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identify--whether family or city, tribe or nation, party or cause. In the communitarian view, these stories make a moral difference, not only a psychological one. They situate us in the world and give our lives their moral particularity.[24]

The final component, though, that connects conservatism and communitarianism is their flexibility in regard to the substantive doctrines which fill out the position. Recall that the substantive doctrines of conservatives can vary depending on the tradition that is conserved. Conservatism is different in the Anglo-American tradition than it is in the Middle Eastern. Sandel also ascribes a similar flexibility to the communitarian position. When setting out more specific

prescriptions that would emerge with communitarianism, in contrast to other positions, Sandel proposes that the specific political and social prescriptions could vary depending on the community in question. For example, he explains, communitarians "would […] allow a town to ban pornographic bookstores, on the ground that pornography offends its way of life."[25] This type of position would put communitarians at odds with liberals, but, Sandel continues, a communitarian position would not always favor what he calls "conservative policies."[26] For example, he claims that communitarians "would be more willing than some rights-oriented liberals to see states enact laws regulating plant closings, to protect their communities from the disruptive effects of capital mobility and sudden industrial change."[27]

These are some samples of how the doctrines of a communitarian position can vary depending on the community itself. Like conservatism, then, communitarianism appears flexible in its doctrines, as it will sometimes offer prescriptions that appear to be right leaning and prescriptions sometimes seem left leaning. One thing that Sandel does emphasize, which may seem at odds with conservative thought, is that, for the communitarian, there is a focus on the common good. The good of the community is the main focus of the communitarian and this focus informs specific prescriptions in various circumstances.[28] On the face of it, this seems like a contrast to the conservative focus on individual liberty. Recall, however, that this commitment of conservatives is mostly an accident of history. Also, for Burke, the community is the primary unit of value and not individual citizens, as was argued earlier in the paper.

That conservatism can be focused on the common good, or the good of the community, is also demonstrated by the nationalist movements which have emerged from the right around the world. For example, some seem perplexed at how Donald Trump has transformed the Republican Party, moving it away from a focus on individualism and free markets toward nationalism and

protectionism. If my analysis is correct, then Trump's success is understandable. The term "nation" simply denotes one type of community and community identity. It is a type of communal identity based on shared traits such as ethnicity, language, religion and government. Nationalism, as a political ideology, involves attachment to the national identity through a multi-layered and pluralistically constructed national mythology that reinforces the unique traits of the national community.[29] One only has to think of the CBC in Canada, which focuses on Canadian culture and history, as well as Trump's embrace of the Evangelical right, as mechanisms of reinforcing specific traits of national identity. Assuredly, there is no necessary connection between one specific form of Christianity and the national identity of 'American,' as this national identity is supposed to be civic and not ethnic.[30] Nonetheless, increasingly a Christian identity has become an important component of the American identity. One only has to think of Obama having to deny being a 'secret Muslim' or various states attempting to erect monuments to the 10 Commandments. If we understand conservatism as really about a community and its traditions, of looking backward at an idealized concept of the past, then we can make sense of Trump's slogans, "Make America Great Again" and "Keep America Great," and their appeal to a specific community.

Reframing conservatism as focused on specific communities and their traditions helps us to better understand this perspective. It also aids in the understanding of the present state of geopolitics and the emergence of nationalism from the right around the world. In times of trouble citizens around the world are looking back towards an ideal past and the traditions of their peoples. Such an approach to political life displays its own inherent problems, as nationalism does more to divide people than bring them together. Clarifying this understanding of conservatism also reinforces concerns that critics have had with communitarianism, i.e., that a focus on specific communities and their traditions could do more to divide individuals than connect them.[31] In

reaction to this problem, liberals, and others[32] argue that we need values that transcend specific communities and their traditions. The best way to justify any moral obligations toward a common good in a way that is inclusive rather than exclusive requires values that are not dependent on the closed system of a community and its traditions. That is grist for another paper, however.

Endnotes

[1] *The Broadview Anthology of Social and Poltical Thought, Essential Readings: Ancient, Modern and Contemporary Texts*, eds. A Bailer, S. Brennan, W. Kymlicka, J. Levey, A. Sager, C. Wolf, Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2012, p. 605.
[2] Dickerson, M. O. Flanagan, T. O'Neill, B., *An Introduction to Government & Politics: A Conceptual Approach, Ninth Edition*, Toronto: Nelson, 2014, pp. 135-136.
[3] Dickerson *et al*., 2014, pp. 117-119, 131-132.
[4] Sandel, M. J., "Morality and the Liberal Ideal," *Philosophy: Contemporary Perspectives on Perennial Issues, Fourth Edition*, eds. E. D. Klemke, A. D. Kline and R. Hollinger, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994, pp. 560-561.
[5] Locke, John, "Two Treatises of Government," *Great Political Thinkers: Plato to The Present, Sixth Edition*, eds. W. Ebenstein and A. Ebenstein, Toronto: Harcourt College Publishers, 2000, pp. 389-392, 394-397, 399-407.
[6] Burke, 2012, p. 606.
[7] Many liberal theorists are also willing to restrict liberty, but when they do such it is due to considerations of liberty itself. For example, Rawls' first principle of justice prescribes equal liberty for all which is only to be restricted by the liberty of others and not restricted by considerations of harm. Behind the veil of ignorance Rawls proposes participants would reject the principle of utility, since it would justify harming a minority (John Rawls, "A Theory of Justice," *The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought; Essential Readings, Ancient, Modern and Contemporary Texts*, pp. 869-870, 872-874). It is also worth noting that Burke's justification of restricting liberty is not utilitarian, or not based on the possible harm to others. This is because he proposes that what defines liberty as a value is the greater social, or communal contest. It is the wider value system of the community that situates all values, including liberty (Edmund Burke, "Reflections on the Revolution in France," *The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought: Essential Readings, Ancient, Modern and Contemporary Texts*, p. 606).
[8] Burke, 2012, p. 607.
[9] Burke, 2012, p. 609.
[10] Burke, 2012, p. 609
[11] Dickerson *et al*., 2014 pp. 131-135.
[12] Burke, 2012, pp. 608-609.
[13] Dickerson *et al*., 2014, pp.135-136.
[14] Dickerson *et al*., like many political theorists, recognize that liberalism and conservatism are two distinct political ideologies even though many political parties which we now call "conservative" really emulate classical liberalism (Dickerson et al., 2014, pp. 136-137). This seems to be changing with the emergence of Trump and Brexit.
[15] Dickerson *et al*., 2014, pp.136-137.
[16] Dickerson *et al*., 2014, pp.131-139.
[17] Sandel, M. J. "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self," *The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought: Essential Readings, Ancient, Modern and Contemporary Texts*, 2012, pp. 945-948.
[18] Sandel, 2012, p. 947.
[19] Rawls, John. "The Contemporary Liberal Answer," *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth, Eighth Edition*, eds. L. P. Pojman and L. Vaughn, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012B, pp. 588-591.
[20] Sandel, 2012, pp. 949-950.

[21] Patton, Paul. "Political Liberalism and Indigenous Rights," *Philosophy and Aboriginal Rights: Critical Dialogues*, eds. Sandra Tomsons and Lorraine Mayer, Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 151-160.
[22] Sandel, 1994, pp. 560-561.
[23] It should be noted that some liberal theorists, most notably Will Kymlicka, have tried to carve out a role for group identities given to individuals by their communities. Kymlicka is reacting specifically to communitarian arguments, and he wants to fit their concerns into a liberal framework. The goal of this paper is not the same as Kymlicka's, but instead to make legitimate connections between conservatism and communitarianism (see Kymlicka, "Multicultural Citizenship," *The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought; Essential Readings, Ancient, Modern and Contemporary Texts*, pp. 993-995, 1004-1005, 1008.
[24] Sandel, 1994, pp. 560-561.
[25] Sandel, 1994, p. 561.
[26] Sandel, 1994, p. 561.
[27] Sandel, 1994, p. 561.
[28] Sandel, 1994, p. 561.
[29] Dickerson *et al*., 2014, pp. 40-43; 163-166.
[30] Dickerson *et al*., 2014, p. 42.
[31] Sandel, 1994, p. 561.
[32] Consider, as one example, the non-relativistic approach to virtues offered by Martha Nussbaum. According to Nussbaum, instead of relying on communities and their traditions to identify virtues, we can perspicuously map universal spheres of human experience (M. Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," ed, J. P. Sterba, *Ethics: The Big Questions*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998, pp. 261-263).

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The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought, Essential Readings: Ancient, Modern and Contemporary Texts, Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, eds. A Bailey, S. Brennan, W. Kymlicka, J. Levy, A Sager, and C. Wolf, Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2012A